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Induction & Mentoring – Increasing Beginning Teacher Retention & Effectiveness

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*Abstract:*

Beginning teacher attrition is a well-documented problem in American education. In an effort to understand this problem studies have been done to attempt to isolate the cause of attrition. Even before the results of the studies were published; states, school districts, teachers unions and schools of education had instituted programs of induction and mentoring in an effort to keep beginning teachers in the classroom. Induction programs vary from state to state and even school district to school district. Beginning teacher induction, at this point in time, is a fractured landscape of different programs and philosophies.

*Introduction to Induction & Mentoring:*

Headlines on education often include the idea that American schools are facing a teaching shortage. This shortage is not due entirely to a lack of qualified teachers but also due to high teacher turnover, particularly in the early years of a teacher’s career (Darling-Hammond, 2003). Another factor exerting influence over teacher shortages is the area of certification. NCLB’s demand that teacher be “highly qualified” has, in many cases broadened and swallowed the qualifications for teaching, thus opening the door for alternately certified teachers.

“Ideally certification keeps poor teachers out of the classroom, while giving people with the potential to be good teachers the skills and experience they need to do their jobs well. But certification may also have an unintended consequence. Because the path to certification can be arduous, it may reduce the appeal of teaching for some people who could potentially become good teachers. (Boyd, Goldhaber, Lankford, Wycoff, 2007)” Alternative certification programs differ significantly from more traditional methods of teacher training (Hawley, 1990). National programs, such as Teach for America, and local programs, such as the Rhode Island Teaching Fellows, have sprung up to combat the problem of teacher attrition by providing an additional source of teachers. These teachers are able to bypass the often long and arduous task of becoming traditionally certified teachers. Time has shown that the best and brightest of these alternatively certified teachers are the most likely to abandon teaching for another career (Halford, 1998).

According to the work of Richard Ingersoll, approximately one third of beginning teachers leave within their first three years and almost half leave by the end of their fifth year (Ingersoll, 2001). Of those that leave in their first year, almost 10% of them will leave during the year rather than at the end of the year (Odell and Ferraro, 1992). In these instances at best students can hope for a single long term substitute to complete the year. Often a series of long term substitutes will complete the year. These losses in the early years of teaching have been attributed to a variety of circumstances. With its high attrition rates, comparable to those of medical and legal professions, education has been dubbed as a field that “eats its young” (Halford, 1998).

Literature on beginning teacher retention appears to have taken on the problem from one of three approaches. First are characteristics within the individual teacher which predispose them to leaving the teaching profession. Much of the literature in this area cites the work of Richard Ingersoll as its source and relies on the Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS). The next approach to the study of new teacher retention looks at problems within the schools which set up unfavorable conditions for new teachers and cause them to leave. The last approach has been to look at new teacher induction programs as a way to retain and improve beginning teachers.

*The Retention Problem*

Research abounds in the area of beginning teacher retention. According to Richard Ingersoll’s 2004 study “29% of beginning teachers left teaching or changed jobs at the end of their first year. (Smith, 2004)” Retention rates for beginning teachers remain dismal through the fifth year; at this point 50% of beginning teachers have left the field (Smith, 2004). In an effort to staunch the hemorrhage of beginning teachers induction programs have been developed, adopted and implemented. Rates of participation in induction programs have risen steadily over the past 20 years. In 1990 51% of public school teachers participated in some form of induction, by 1999 that number had risen to 83% (Smith, 2004).

*Attrition – Multiple Avenues for Blame*

Sara Winsted Fry in her 2007 article, First-Year Teachers and Induction Support: Ups, Downs, and In-Betweens, states that teaching is one of few professions where those who are new are expected to perform at the same level as those who are veterans in their field (Fry, 2007). This idea leads to an increased stress level for new teachers as their more experienced counterparts have already worked out the areas beginning teacher struggle with (Fry, 2007). A beginning teacher must create all of their lessons from scratch or be provided them by a more experienced peer. Even if given premade lessons the teacher must spend time incorporating the lesson into their own framework. Beginning teachers often struggle with issues of classroom management which their more experienced counterparts have already worked out (Ingersoll, 2001; Glassford, 2007; Rideout, 2010). In essence the first few years of teaching can be seen as an individual being thrown into a tempest and struggling to keep their head above water; those who manage to stay afloat stay in the field and those who do not leave. Ingersoll puts it well when he states “critics have long assailed teaching as an occupation that ‘cannibalizes’ its young and in which the initiation of new teachers is akin to a ‘skin or swim,’ ‘trial by fire,’ or ‘boot camp’. (Ingersoll, 2001)” Also, in this new age of standards, assessment and accountability new teachers are bound by curricular constraints which their elder peers did not have to deal with early in their careers.

Much of the research done has followed beginning teachers though the early stages of their careers one area which has been clearly related to beginning teacher attrition is the beginning teacher’s perception of their job (Darling-Hammond, 2003). Positive job perception is associated with retention and negative perception is associated with attrition.

Additional factors which also appear to influence teacher retention include the age of the new teacher, the background from which they are coming and their reason for entering the teaching profession. The younger or older the beginning teacher the more likely they are to leave. The data, according to Ingersoll, while stating that beginning teachers who are young or old are at a higher risk of leaving the field, the ones at the greatest risk for leaving are those who are young. (Ingersoll, 2001) In the area of background, the content area which the teacher comes from appears to have a dramatic impact on whether they remain. Math, science and special educators are at a higher risk for leaving the profession than other educators. It is believed that this occurs due to their ability to find employment easily in other sectors (Boe, 1997). The reason the educator selected teaching as their career and their future plans or goals have a dramatic impact on whether an individual stays in teaching. Some beginning teachers who enter the profession do some with the express idea in mind that teaching is a temporary job on the path to something else (Peske, Liu, Johnson, Kauffman, & Kardos, 2001).

An additional characteristic which is difficult to categorize as a characteristic of the individual teacher or a characteristics of the teaching environment is teaching outside the beginning teacher’s content area (Johnson, 2004). Many beginning teachers who are placed in urban, low SES districts teach outside their content area. An example of this could be as related as a biology teacher teaching chemistry or an English teacher teaching math. Teaching outside the content area is associated with an increase in leaving the teaching profession. This characteristic is difficult to place as it rests with both the individual and the school system by which they are employed. Teaching outside one’s content area often requires that the teacher teach themselves the material prior to presenting it to the students. This can add additional work and stress to the experience of the beginning teacher. The practice can also be classified under the school environment characteristics if this is a practice often adopted by a district as is common in low SES urban districts (Johnson, 2004)

Every school and district can be broken down into its own set of descriptive characteristics. These characteristics include available resources, administrative setup, viewpoints on teacher free time, salary and advancement opportunity. School districts, through their hiring process, have the ability to select they type of teachers they wish to include in their community. Often large sums of time and money are spent through the hiring process. These hiring procedures are designed to control for the internal factors inherent to each beginning teacher. These efforts are important, but they are not the end of the story; factors inherent to the school have a direct impact on teacher job satisfaction and attrition. District factors include class size limits, including those limits on the number of students with IEPs, 504 plans, who are LEP; the leadership hierarchy of the district; and the respect of administration for the professional opinions of teachers(Certo, J. & Fox, J., 2002).

In addition to characteristics which predispose a beginning teacher to exit the profession that are situated within the individual there are characteristics of the school environment which can influence a beginning teachers’ decision to exit the profession. First among these characteristics of the school setting is SES (Darling-Hammond & Green, 1994). Low SES schools have a higher rate of teacher turnover than high SES schools. It is important to note that teacher turnover does not necessarily mean that all of these teachers are leaving the profession entirely; in fact many of these teachers are not leaving the profession but are migrating to higher SES schools (Smith, 2004).

Beginning teacher retention problems begin with hiring practices. Susan Johnson describes supportive hiring practices as those hiring practices which increase the likelihood of a good match between teacher and school (Johnson, 2004), A good match is achieved when both parties are aware of the situation which they are entering into. These hiring practices can include, but are again not limited to, teaching a mock lesson, interviews with members of the school community other than the administration and observation of classes. Hiring practices which promote openness and understanding can help beginning teachers to have a realistic picture of the position and can allow for greater insight on the part of the district into their potential hire (Johnson, 2004). These procedures are less evident in low SES school districts.

Lack of support from the individual’s district also has an impact on beginning teacher retention (Ingersoll, 2001). This idea of support not only includes the idea of induction but also includes other forms of support such as teacher schedule, room assignment and materials. Anecdotally, it seems to be a long standing tradition in American schools to given the most taxing list of students or classes to the “low man on the totem pole.” Teachers who are new to a school , which can include both experienced teachers who are changing jobs and beginning teachers, often get the scheduling “leftovers” that those who have more seniority have left behind. For a beginning teacher three preps or more, all of which must be dealt with nearly from scratch can be overwhelming. Additionally, many of these new to school teachers are not assigned their own rooms due to scheduling and space conflicts. These teachers must teach classes in multiple rooms which leaves them without a base of operations in which to get organized. According to one 1997 study “15.3% of public school teachers who left the profession cited inadequate support from the administration as the main reason for their departure. (Whitener, 1997)”

Another area often cited for beginning teachers’ departure from the teaching profession is student discipline (Langdon, 1999). Classroom management has long been seen as an area of struggle for beginning teachers and is one area which is most visible to those outside their classrooms (Rideout, 2010). Disciplinary referrals are sent to administration and administrators can track the number of referrals a teacher gives. For many beginning teachers the fear of referring students for disciplinary problems results in a catch 22. The thought being if too many referrals are written then the administration will recognize the beginning teacher’s problem controlling their students. If the teacher refrains from referring the students to higher authorities then the discipline problems in the class do not cease. Additionally, disruptive student behaviors have been shown to weaken a teacher’s commitment to their career (Weiss, 1999). Studies in teacher retention have shown that “policy makers have designed many strategies aimed at retaining teachers, their retention strategies have seldom emphasized resolving student discipline problems. Our study showed that student discipline problem could have sustained unfavorable effects on teachers’ professional commitment. Our own experiences with teachers also indicated that many teachers had entered teaching with a zeal for the profession but eventually left teaching because of bad experiences with rowdy students in classroom. It is student discipline problems that ultimately wear out their initial enthusiasm about teaching. “So strategies to retain teachers should also focus on establishing disciplinary order in school and improving teachers’ work condition in classroom.” (Kim, 2005)

The problems of discipline and fear of judgment form administration are related and are not uncommon in the literature. Kim points to the fact that positive interaction with administration is seen to show a positive correlation with intent to stay in teaching (2005; Fry, 2007). Praise is a valuable tool in building up a teacher’s self confidence in their teaching. Negative experiences with school administration including admonishment for problems with classroom management correlated negatively with a teacher’s intent to stay in teaching (Kim, 2005).

In addition to school and district factors that promote attrition some specific teaching areas also experience higher levels of attrition. Special education has the highest attrition rate of all areas. It is repeatedly noted as a shortage area, which opens the gate for alternatively certified teachers (Fore, Martin & Bender, 2002)

*Introduction to Induction*

In an effort to staunch the hemorrhage of beginning teachers leaving the field most school systems have instituted some form of induction program. Eighty percent of beginning teachers are now exposed to some permutation of induction (Ingersoll, 2001, 2004). In her 2007 study Sara Fry followed four beginning teachers through their first year. Each participant was exposed to different induction protocols, all of which had their ups and downs. Type of induction and support is correlated to district wealth (Johnson, 2003). Beginning teachers in wealthier districts received more support and mentoring than those in low income districts. Types induction provided vary as well. Induction programs can consist of only mentoring or only seminars but often include some combination of both.

Induction programs, in general, have four goals. Firstly, they exist to improve learning and teaching for students. The early years of a teacher’s career are not their most effective. It takes considerable time to become an expert teacher. Secondly, induction programs exist to increase retention of beginning teachers. Thirdly, the opportunity to mentor, to he held up by the school as an example of a good teacher, can invigorate and revitalize experienced teachers. Lastly, induction programs exist to increase professional efficacy (Moore, 2008).

Induction activities can be categorized in several different ways. One method of categorizing induction activities is to classify them as high intensity or low intensity. High intensity activities require substantial funding, planning and effort on the part of the school or district employing these activities. Examples of high intensity activities include beginning teacher seminars and participation in educational conferences. They are associated with greater beginning teacher effectiveness but not with higher levels of beginning teacher retention. Low intensity activities require substantially less funding, planning and effort on the part of the school or district employing them. They are associated with greater beginning teacher retention but not with greater effectiveness (Moore, 2008). Mentoring is an example of a low intensity activity.

In addition to school district sponsored induction programs, the problem of beginning teacher retention has been noticed and taken on by higher education institutions (Davis, 2006; Sanderson, 2003). A partnership has arisen between Texas State University and the surrounding school districts which has significantly increased the beginning teacher retention for the school districts. The TFP is a partnership program between Texas State University and several school districts within an 80 mile radius. Results of this partnership have increased beginning teacher retention; participants have a retention rate of 83% (Davis, 2006). Additionally, this program appears to limit the number of teachers who teach for a time and then go off into some field within the education system, administration or guidance for example (Davis, 2006).

Induction programs have an added benefit for districts in that beginning teachers tend to revert back to lower forms of teaching, like lecture, early in their careers when other methods fail to produce desired results or produce undesirable student behaviors (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). Beginning teacher beliefs about their own self-efficacy can have a dramatic impact on the manner in which they teach. Lower self-efficacy leads to lower forms of teaching (Woolfolk, Rosoff & Hoy,1990). Lower forms of teaching include, but are not limited to, lecture and silent, independent busy work. Both of which have their place in instruction but should not be used as the sole instructional methodology. Well matched mentor mentee relationships can combat this instinct in beginning teachers (Kardos, 2001).

The most frequently encountered form of induction is mentoring (Ingersoll, 2004). Mentoring, at its most basic definition is the partnering of a beginning teacher with an experienced teacher. Mentors can serve different roles, they can help to form the new teacher or they can serve as a resource for integration into the school community. A broad spectrum exists in education when it comes to mentoring programs. These programs “may differ according to the degree of formality of the mentoring relationship, the selection and training of mentors, the amount of release time a mentor is given, the amount and nature of the support mentors give teachers, and the appropriateness of match between mentor and mentee. (Fletcher, 2009)” Mentor-mentee relationships can occur in person or online (Anthony & Kritsonis, 2007)

The work of a mentor is different from the regular work of a classroom teacher. Data from Stephen Fletcher’s 2009 study on the effects of mentoring on student achievement found that beginning teachers who were mentored by full time mentors who has no classroom responsibilities of their own made greater gains than those who were mentored by teachers who have their own classes (Fletcher, 2009). This study did not look at the effect of the different types of mentors on beginning teacher retention.

Other studies on mentoring have looked at the specific skills that mentors need in order to be successful. When mentors are seen as an evaluative force their efficacy decreases (Fry, 2007) as interaction with the mentor can be interpreted by the new teacher as admitting that they are unprepared for the position. Mentor training should stress assessment and feedback not evaluation (Moore, 2008).

Matching mentors to mentees is a problem in many districts. Beginning teachers benefit most from trained mentors who teach within their content area and ideally share one or more similar courses. Additionally attitudes of the mentor and mentee to the process have a dramatic impact on mentoring success (Stanulis, 2009). The quality of mentor-mentee relations is also a influenced by district SES. Higher income districts have more funding available to spend on training mentors than low SES districts (Johnson, 2004).

Collaborative environments have been shown to increase new teacher retention (Chapman & Green, 1986). Collaborative environments can include team teaching and common planning time. Though there are cases, as cited by Sara Fry’s qualitative study where collaboration is seen by the new teacher as a negative and actually factors into the beginning teacher’s decision to leave the profession (Fry, 2007).

*Problems with Induction*

Even with the many positive effects of induction on beginning teacher retention, some induction programs in and of themselves are cited as a reason for leaving the teaching profession. Induction is not only work for the district that starts the program or the mentor; it also creates extra work for the beginning teacher. In the TFP program for example one of the reasons individuals who left the program cited was that the program itself was too much work (Davis, 2006).

Induction programs that require beginning teachers to be pulled out of the classroom for a day can add an additional level of stress for the beginning teacher. Many of these individuals are still learning to plan lessons for the days that they are in school which will fill the time allotted for each class period. Planning effective lessons for substitute teachers is a skill that these beginning teachers may not have fully developed (Fry, 2007). Additionally, all teachers are expected to keep on pace with the curriculum, so lost time due to participation in induction activities can make this difficult (Fry, 2007).

Induction programs can have the power to change beginning teacher practice for the better or worse. Beginning teachers who have been educated through programs of teacher preparation have been exposed to a wide variety of research-based teaching methodologies. Traditional methodologies, like lecture, are not generally touted as good teaching in programs of teacher preparation. Yet, when beginning teachers enter the schools changes in their teaching style can occur due to interaction with their new peer group, the experienced teachers already teaching in that school (Fry, 2007).

Poor matchups between the mentor and the mentee can be another problem with induction that leads to attrition. Ideally, mentors should be experienced, highly effective teachers who are enthusiastic about teaching and have been given specific training in how to mentor beginning teachers. Sometimes these qualities are hard to find and schools must resort to using less than ideal candidates as mentors. The issue of mentor experience is critical due to the fact that mentors are supposed to help their mentees with day-to-day problems like classroom management. A mentor who is only a few years into their own teaching career will most likely not have the same proficiency in dealing with these issues than someone who has been in the classroom longer (Fry, 2007).

Mentors not only exist to help beginning teachers with problems in their own classroom, they also exist to help the beginning teacher to fully integrate into the school community. It seems to be common sense that if a mentor exists to help a beginning teacher become part of the school community then the mentor themselves should be an established member of the school community. The use of mentors who are not established members of the school community does not support the goal of integration.

Another problem with induction that can lead to attrition is poor alignment between the induction program and the experience of the beginning teacher (Cherubini, 2007). Induction programs should be designed to meet the needs of the participants and address problems relevant to their experience. Programs that fail to do this are seen by inductees as irrelevant (Cherubini, 2007) and participation in them can be seen by the beginning teacher in a negative way. Additionally, the time needed to prepare to attend these induction programs can be seen as stressful if participation requires that he teacher prepare lesson plans for a substitute (Fry, 2009).

Conclusion:

The problem of beginning teacher of retention is an old problem that has not yet been solved. Recent studies and policy changes have brought the problem of begging teacher retention to light. Ingersoll’s data that states that 29% of beginning teachers leave the profession or changes jobs in the first year is not likely to change any time soon. Additionally, with more and more alternative pathways to certification as an educator being approved each year the need for quality induction programs will only increase as individuals are entering the teaching profession who do not have a background in education. For beginning teachers who enter the profession through alternative routes, like Teach for America and the Rhode Island Teaching Fellows, induction programs will need to act as programs of teacher preparation in their own right if these individuals are to succeed in the classroom.

From the prevalence and variety of induction programs that exist, it is clear that schools have noticed that induction has the power to increase retention. Over 80% of beginning teachers now participate in some form of school sponsored induction (Smith, 2004). State and National boards of education, like the Rhode Island Department of Elementary and Secondary Education and the Ontario’s Ministry of education have published documents encouraging induction. Other states have gone even further to create standardized models of induction. The ultimate goals of induction are increased retention and increased effectiveness. Teacher retention results cost and time savings for schools as well as continuity in the education of the students. Increased teacher effectiveness results in higher performing schools.

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